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DE RUEHDM #5367/01 3401343

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 005367

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NEA/ELA

NSC FOR MARCHESE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/06/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: GERMAN FM STEINMEIER'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.5 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary. German FM Steinmeier paid a very brief visit to Damascus to discuss, primarily, regional issues. Nothing was promised by either side and little progress was made on influencing either countries' stance on regional conflicts. Nonetheless, the local German Embassy assesses the visit to have been a success in that it gave their Foreign Minister a clearer understanding of how the SARG views the region. Syrian contacts in general discounted the importance of the visit while a key opposition figure expressed a distinct lack of enthusiasm for such signs of European re-engagement but thought any EU visitor's message on Lebanon would remain very tough. End summary.

¶2. (U) On Monday, December 4, German Foreign Minister Frank Steinmeier visited Damascus for six hours. Steinmeier was met at the airport by his Syrian counterpart, FM Walid Mu'allem. Steinmeier spent one and a half hours with President Asad, after meeting separately with Mu'allem, Vice President Farouq Shara'a, and DFM Faisal Miqdad. Syrian press gave favorable, though surprisingly muted coverage to the Steinmeier visit, presenting it as an acknowledgment of the key role Syria plays in regional issues. (Note: Steinmeier shared front page billing in some Syrian dailies with fellow visitor, Hamas PM Ismael Haniyeh, and in others, was bumped off the front page completely. End note.) Steinmeier and Mu'allem read statements to the press, following their joint lunch, that largely focused on regional issues. The Syrian state-controlled press gave prominence to Steinmeier's public commendation of Syria for reestablishing diplomatic ties with Iraq and to his comment that Syria was playing a constructive role in restarting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

¶3. (C) The German Ambassador, Mr. Volkmar Wenzel, provided the Charge with a readout of the visit. He described the visit as a "lost opportunity" primarily because of the SARG's recalcitrant views on Lebanon. Many of Wenzel's other points were echoed to us separately by Jurgen Steffen, Political Counselor at the German Embassy. Though FM Steinmeier had twice previously planned travel to Damascus, both trips were canceled at the last minute because of provocative statements made by Asad. The genesis of this visit was to prepare Steinmeier for Germany's assumption of the EU presidency in January, according to Steffen. Ambassador Wenzel told Charge the timing for the visit was bad but unavoidable. Steinmeier decided that he needed to hear Syrian views and that any visit to Damascus would not be possible once Germany

assumed the presidency of the EU, since all such visits would be decided on by consensus. Steffen commented that his MFA thought it important that Steinmeier hear from all regional players on their perspective towards regional conflicts. Steffen commented that since Steinmeier had never previously visited Damascus, a stop here was especially important. Steinmeier's consultations, therefore, focused on Lebanon, Iraq, and the peace process, with bilateral issues, like human rights and democracy, relegated to brief side-bar conversations with Steinmeier's lower-ranking interlocutors.

¶4. (C) According to Steffen, most of Steinmeier's conversations concentrated on Lebanon. Without any success, Steinmeier pushed Asad hard for a public gesture of goodwill to reinforce the Syrians' assertions that stability in Lebanon was a priority for them, Wenzel told Charge. Asad, Mu'alem, and Shara'a, in separate meetings, emphasized that the SARG does not want to see the situation in Lebanon get out of hand or escalate further. But when pushed, Asad, reverting to a standard talking point, asserted that the SARG no longer played any role in Lebanon for good or bad, since withdrawing its troops in the spring of 2005. Asad commented that the problems in Lebanon now belonged to Europe and the United States to manage, and Syria would remain as a passive spectator. Shara'a and Asad both made the point to Steinmeier that Siniora's government would likely fall because of its inability to give adequate representation to the Shi'a.

¶5. (C) On the peace process, Steinmeier was assured that the SARG would use its influence, "such as it is", to encourage the Palestinians to continue a national dialogue and work towards a national unity government. Mu'alem highlighted to Steinmeier his recent visit to Baghdad and the

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re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Iraq, as signs of the constructive role the SARG wants to play there. All of Steinmeier's Syrian interlocutors, however, emphasized the limited ability the SARG has to influence the situation there. Asad and others asserted to Steinmeier that Syria would play a constructive role in Iraq irrespective of "what others do" because it is in Syria's national interest that instability does not spread and that Iraq remain one country.

¶6. (C) OTHER REACTION: Syrian contacts in general discounted the importance of the Steinmeier visit, viewing it as another in a series of European visits, none of which was really significant. In the view of these contacts, the regime tended to take the Europeans for granted, and look past them to the critical interlocutor for Syria, the U.S. A key opposition figure, Riad Seif, told us he assessed the atmosphere of Steinmeier's visit as being relatively cold, primarily because the German FM apparently made Lebanon a real issue. Seif voiced a distinct lack of enthusiasm for these signs of European re-engagement with the Syrian regime, but expressed a mix of confidence and hope that any future visitors would continue to tell SARG officials -- as he was convinced Steinmeier and others had -- that Lebanon was a red line for Europe and Syrian efforts to destabilize it would disrupt any nascent European re-engagement with Syria.

¶7. (C) Comment. Steinmeier reportedly came to Damascus with low expectations so he was not disappointed. Still, the visit appears less than satisfying for either side in terms of substance, although the Syrians are obviously happy to have a visitor of Steinmeier's stature regardless of any tough messages he may have delivered. As Steffen allowed, the Syrians obviously were expecting more from Steinmeier than just words. The German Embassy at least seems to have held out some now-dashed hopes that the SARG would offer Steinmeier a public gesture to encourage further rapprochement. Following so closely on the assassination of Pierre Gemeyal and concurrent with the March 8 actions to bring down the Siniora government, the timing of the Steinmeier visit can be read locally as reinforcing the SARG

belief that it can aggressively pursue its destabilizing policies in Lebanon without damaging its relations with the European community.

CORBIN